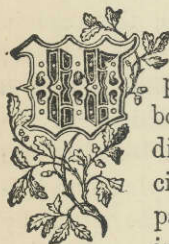


CHAPTER XXV.

THE KATE RAMSEY RELIEVES THE FLYING CLOUD ON THE STATION NORTH OF INDIAN KEY—THE LATTER SAILS FOR CAPE FLORIDA—FRED RANSOM AND GEORGE BOWERS LISTEN TO THE MEN SPINNING YARNS—BRADY EXCELS ALL THE REST.



WHAT a change had come over my prospects! One day the cabin-boy of a wrecker, and perhaps a disowned child; the next, the associate of my employer, the companion of his son, and a boy happy in the knowledge that he was still beloved at home. I felt that I could not be sufficiently grateful to God for his mercies to me,—for having guided me to these kind friends, and blessed me with such confiding love.

The *Flying Cloud* and the *Kate Ramsey* belonged to the same owners. The latter had orders to relieve us on the station, and we were ordered to occupy a station off Cape Florida.

The *Kate Ransey* brought us a supply of various articles of which we were in need, and also a very acceptable addition of tropical fruit. There were two barrels and a couple of boxes, containing cocoa-nuts, oranges, pineapples, yams, bananas, limes, sappodillas, and mammees. The last two I never fancied. They always tasted to me like a mixture of strawberries and turpentine.

On the morning after the arrival of the *Kate Ramsey*, the men were engaged for two or three hours in transporting the stores from one vessel to the other. Meanwhile, the captain wrote to his owners and family in Key West; and I availed myself of the chance to write a long letter to my father, and add it to the captain's mail, which was left on board of the *Kate Ramsey*. That vessel, occupying our station, would soon be able to send the letters by some vessel sailing from Indian Key. Bidding a long farewell to our old anchorage, we set sail up the Reef.

I found that George was very well acquainted with the men, having frequently seen them when the schooner was in Key West. On inquiry, I ascertained that the reason I had not met him in Key West, was that he had been absent, having been at school at St. Augustine. George was a very communicative fellow, and the men learned

of my promotion within an hour of its occurrence, whereupon they congratulated me with mock ceremony, but without the slightest appearance of envy. Since then, I have associated with men of all ranks in life, but under homespun or broadcloth, never knew better hearts than those possessed by that little knot of rude seamen.

The wind was ahead, and we did not make more than thirty miles before night set in; and then the breeze gradually died away, and we were forced to let go our anchor. The nights are exquisitely lovely in Florida. On that particular one the stars shone out brightly; the gentlest zephyr played over waters that broke in phosphorescent waves. Nature seemed hushed in repose, and the low laugh and murmuring voices of the men collected on the forward deck seemed to indicate that they felt the quiet influence of the scene.

"Where do you sleep?" said George to me, as he reclined near me on the quarter-deck, where we had been enjoying a long boy-talk.

"Your father permitted me to occupy a berth in the cabin," I replied, "and I have always slept there."

"Did n't you ever sleep on deck?" inquired George.

"No," said I; "although I must say that on

some nights I felt like it. I was afraid that your father might think it out of the way."

"That was all very well then," said George, "but now you need n't be afraid. I never sleep below on a night like this, when the schooner's at anchor. Wait a bit, and I'll show you my rig."

Saying this, he went down into the cabin, and brought up a mosquito bar with long strings fastened to the corners of the top, which was formed of a stout piece of muslin. The strings on one side, he made fast to the main-boom; of the other two, he made one fast to the shrouds, and the other to a boat-davit. The net then hung evenly, with its lower edges trailing on the surface of the quarter-deck, which was a trunk-cabin. He brought up his bedding and placed it under the bar and tucked the edges in all around, excepting one place to crawl under, and then said:

"Is n't that bunkum?"

"Splendid!" I replied.

"Well, if you like it," said he, "why can't you fix yours on the other side of the boom?"

"Because," said I, laughing, "I have n't got any to fix."

"Oh! that's the idea, is it?" replied George.

"Wait a while! There's an old one of mine

aboard, full of holes, but you can mend them to-morrow."

We rummaged in a locker, and having found the old net, it was rigged up on the other side of the boom.

"You must look out for the moonlight," said George, as he assisted me in putting up my bar.

"Look out for the moonlight!" echoed I. "Why should I look out for the moonlight?"

"Why, do n't you know," said George, "that if you sleep with the moonlight on your face, it will draw it up so badly, that you would n't know yourself in the glass?"

"No!" said I, "you are joking, are you not?"

"Not a bit of it," he replied, "you ask father how one of his men, called Tom Barton, caught it one night, when he came aboard drunk, and lay all night on his back, with the moon shining right in his face. Ask Brady, he knew the man: I hear Brady's voice talking there forward."

"Brady's word," said I, "would not go far with me, for he tells the biggest yarns I ever heard."

"Very well," said George, "then ask my father to-morrow: he has turned in now. The bars are fixed, what do you say to going forward

and hearing some of the men's yarns? I don't feel like sleep yet."

"Nor I, either," I replied, "the night seems too beautiful to sleep it all away."

We found the men sitting near the windlass. There was no moon yet, and the picture lay in dark patches, except where the starlight, shining here and there, lighted a face, a bit of cordage, a block, or a spot of glossy rounding spar. The men had evidently been telling a succession of yarns, each one taking his turn in producing the most marvellous story in his budget. As George and I approached, the voice of Bill Ruggles ceased, and then said,

"Here's the boys. Begging pardon, the young captain, and the professor," he added, with mock respect. "I was taking my turn at spinning a yarn. Would you like to hear about an alligator that I once saw killed on the Mississippi?"

"Go ahead," said George, "that is just what we came for."

"The alligator, you see," said Ruggles, resuming his story, "was as much as fifty yards from the edge of the marsh, and we were six men. Hows'ever, I believe if he'd been able to turn quick, which they can't, being kind of hampered by a bone on each side of their necks, he'd have killed one or two on us. Sometimes,

he'd stop, and make a short fight, and then off for the water again. It didn't seem as if we could stop him, until three of the party fetched a heavy timber of drift wood, and punted it up and dropped it on the critter's head. That stunned him like, and you never see such a rolling round and gasping and making awful swipes with his tail. We had to stand clear of the tail. We ran in with a hatchet and an axe, and put in two or three cuts on his neck. Then he was past getting away, and we got in two or three more cuts with the axe, and, at last, chopped his head right square off.

"Now I'm coming to the curious part of the thing. We left the head and body, and went down to our boat, and sot there as much as a half hour, and was going off to the vessel with the water-casks, when we thought we'd take one look at the alligator. One of the men was just going to feel of the head with the toe of his boot, and, as luck would have it, I thought how long snapping-turtles' heads lived after they were cut off, and I says, 'Avast there, Jim, jest try the blade of your hatchet.' He had n't more'n touched the critter's head with the blade of the hatchet, when, my sake! its eyes opened, and sparkled with fire like, and its jaws shut on the hatchet-blade, so that some

of its teeth were ground to flour. Some one says to Jim, 'You did n't give him a fair shot, jest touching his nose.' So Jim put the hatchet down again, and the alligator's jaws shut on it so fast we could n't get it out, and had to take hold of the hatchet-handle and carry the head along to the boat, where we stowed it out of the way of our shins, and rowed off to the vessel. I'd be afeard to say how long the head lived afterwards. And that's a true story, every bit of it, for I see the thing myself, with my own eyes."

"It's your turn now, Brady," said Deal.

"I think ye must have an illigant sufficiency for the night," replied Brady.

"No, we haven't," said Linden; "honor bright, now, Brady! It was to be turn and turn about."

"Well, byes," said Brady, "I've no objection to spell yees a bit. But whinever I tell ye any thing, ye're always screwin' up yer eyes, and distartin' yer fatures at a'most every ither word I say, and botherin' me with yer 'is that so, Brady,' and 'till that to the maranes,' when the thing's not strange at all, at all. What 'ud ye be afther doin' if I till yees a right wontherful story? I guess I won't waste me breath."

"Oh, yes, Brady!" exclaimed the men, with one accord.

"Yes, Brady," continued Ruggles, "it's too dark to see us, so there's no danger of your knowing it, if you come to any thing rather tough; and we won't interrupt you."

"Yis," replied Brady, "but whin I get through, it'll be, 'is that so, Brady,' and 'till that to the maranes.'"

"Not a bit of it," replied Ruggles, "we won't say a word. Will we, shipmates? it's agreed, is n't it?"

Every one agreeing to the terms, Brady commenced.

"Spakin' of th' alligator, reminds me of somethin' I once saw in Ireland."

"On your uncle's estate?" said Ruggles, gravely.

"On me ooncle's eshtate, it was," replied Brady. "It takes in the best pashture-land in the county, but me ooncle has a patch o' bog, about sax be three mile, jest for diggin' pate for the farm tinants. I was spindin' me time at the place, shootin' and the like o' that; and the first night sich a roarin' come from the bog, as made the ground trimble. I says to me ooncle in the mornin', what baste is that ye've got in the bog? Last night the roarin' was awful.

“‘Did ye never hear one of thim?’ says me ooncle, ‘it’s a kraken, and he’s ate ’most two flock of sheep on me.* One of me shipherds was here yisterday, and said he’d fixed a con-thraption that would ketch the baste beautiful, and I’m going prisintly to see him drawed out o’ the bog. If ye’d like to g’lang, jest say the worrud.’

“Says I, I’m wid ye, faith I’d like to see the baste as could murther me rest!”

“‘An’ me shape,’ says me ooncle ‘but here’s the bye and the nags, let’s be aff.’

“Afther ridin’ a mather of tin mile, we come to the bog, and on the idge of it was some tinants with ox-tames and carts, and in one of thim a shape newly slaughtered, and a big coil of cable wid a hook on the ind of it. The min threaded the shape on the hook, and sint a bye galloping over the bog to drop it in a big hole quite convanient to where we was standin’.

“In less nor tin minutes, the cable com-minced to wark, and the tinants clapped to it, and made it fast to the pole of an ox-cart, and goaded the oxen; but they could n’t stir a peg, and out of the bog came a roarin’ to make yer hair stand on ind.

* The kraken was a fabulous sea-monster, reputed for a long time to frequent the coast of Norway.

“ ‘Anither yoke of oxen, me byes,’ says me ooncle, and the min hitched anither yoke, thirteen foot girth, not an inch less; an’ the two yoke hauled till their noses teched the ground, and I see the head and fore legs of the kraken coming out of the hole, and its roarin’ was frightful to hear, and it twisted its snout and fore legs in the bog, so the oxen stopped short to blow.

“The oxen was *dead bate*, and me ooncle says, ‘byes, clap on anither yoke, and we’ll fetch the spalpeen.’ The tinants hitches them on, and the noses of the three yokes goes down to the ground with the strength of the haulin’ they done; and the roarin’ made the bog quake all around, and jest as the oxen was a’most spint, the line slacks up, and sinds thim a-sprawlin.’

“ ‘Be the powers,’ says me ooncle, ‘we’ve drawn him.’

“ ‘No, we have n’t, bad cess to him,’ says one of the tinants, ‘we’ve drawn the *shape* out of him.’ An’ sure, an’ when we’d hauled the shape up to the place where we was standin’, there was nothin’ on the hook, barring itself and a pace of an intrail.”

Silence ensued, unbroken, except by suppressed laughter and a few prolonged whistlings.

"Well, Brady," said Ruggles, at last, "I thought Saint Patrick drove all the varmint out of Ireland; it seems to me he left a pretty big one."

"Bedad!" said Brady, scratching the side of his head, "there was one varmint the Sint never got out of Ireland, and that's sin, and it's me belafe, byes, that the kraken was Sathan himself."

At this, the suppressed laughter burst forth, and the whistling found free vent.

"Be still, wid yer whistlin'!" said Brady, "or ye'll rise a storrum."

"The captain will, if we make so much noise," said Ruggles. "Come along, boys, be quiet! Let's turn in."

The men arose, and began to disperse; but every now and then they went off into fits of laughter, interspersed with whistling so significant, that it was hardly worth while for them to have made their agreement with Brady.

George and I retired to the trunk-cabin. With a delightful sense of perfect contentment, not experienced for many a day, I chatted with him under the boom, until we both fell into a drowsy state that a few seconds converted into deep slumber.